Leon D. Stitskin

A LETTER OF MAIMONIDES TO SAMUEL IBN TIBBON

INTRODUCTION

Reading the letters of Maimonides, one ceases to think of the halakhist and philosopher but, instead, becomes aware of the presence of a solicitous guide and a patient spirit. Nowhere do we get such an insight into the vicissitudes of the life of this great sage as in his epistle to Samuel Ibn Tibbon, the official translator of his work. Of special interest in the letter is the classic canon Maimonides formulates for his correspondent's guidance in the art of translation, one which may well serve as a model for all translators.

What follows is a translation of a portion of the epistle to Samuel Ibn Tibbon. We have omitted several paragraphs which deal mainly with Maimonides' response to some technical question raised by the translator; these are included in his translation of the *Guide for the Perplexed.* The last part of the present selection is based on the translation by Abrahams in his *Maimonides.* The letter was written in September 1199 and opens with a eulogy of Samuel's father, Judah.

L.D.S.

"In accordance with his intelligence is a man praised" (Prov. 12:8). I received all the correspondence of the esteemed, learned, and perceptive student who is the crown of disciples, the glory of the learned, the revered Rabbi Samuel, son of the wise Rabbi Judah Ibn Tibbon, the Spaniard, of blessed memory. The reputation of your esteemed and learned father, Rabbi Judah, was established for a long time. We were informed of his prodigious knowledge and the lucidity of his language in Arabic and Hebrew from some of the well known scholars of Granada, descendants of Al-Fakhas, among whom was the sage Ibn Moska. Also, a revered and respected scholar of Tudela came here and told us

about your father, of sainted memory. We had similar reports from the revered scholar Rabbi Meyer, student of Rabbi Abraham Ibn Daud, of blessed memory, spiritual head of Posquières as well as of Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra. He informed us also about several grammar and science textbooks he had translated.

I did not know, however, that he left a son. When your Arabic and Hebrew letters reached me, they gave me an insight into your wide range of interest and beauty of style. When I noted further your doubts concerning some of the passages in my distinctive volume *Guide for the Perplexed* and the errors of the scribe you perceived therein, I repeated the words of the ancient poet: "if only they knew his ancestry, they would say the merit of the father is passed on to the son."

Blessed be He who has granted a recompense to your learned father, and granted him such a son! — indeed, not to him alone, but to all wise men. For in truth, "unto us all a child has been born, unto us all a son has been given." This offspring of the righteous is a tree of life, a delight of our eyes, and pleasant to look upon. I have already tasted of his fruit, and lo, it was sweet in my mouth even as honey.

The questions you raised are all valid, and the omissions you noted of one or several words in many places are correct. I have already explained to you all these things in Arabic at the end of this letter and advised you about all your activities, as well as the books you should read and those that should be omitted. You are surely well equipped and qualified to engage in the work of translation, for the Almighty has endowed you with an understanding heart to comprehend similes and parables, the epigrams of the wise and their riddles. I recognized from your correspondence that you have the capacity to delve into the depth of a subject and reveal its hidden meaning.

Moreover, I explained to you in Arabic the method to apply in all translations. "Give [instruction] to the wise and he will become yet wiser," and the wisdom of my son will gladden my heart too. Verily, when I saw your correspondence and perceived the beauty of your diction and probed into the depth of your conceptions and the wisdom of your speech so clearly enunciated, I was exceedingly delighted but at the same time amazed at the

existence of such a wise son. I was furthermore astonished and wondered: how it was possible for one born among the stutterers to develop thus, to pursue the sciences and display such proficiency in the Arabic language — which is after all only a corrupt Hebrew? Then again, how is it possible to master the detailed grammar of the language and use it skillfully in such profound subjects? This surely cannot "be as a root out of a dry land!" May the Blessed Almighty cause you to be illuminated by the radiance of His Torah until you will become like "those that love Him and as the rising of the sun in its might." Amen. May this be God's will!

Likewise, the writings of the exalted, esteemed, and learned academy reached me. May the Blessed Almighty also perpetuate its meritorious role, increase forever its welfare, and intensify its fount of wisdom!

I checked all the doubtful points you raised in the text, examined all the places where you indicated the scribe erred, and took note of the introductions and the chapters which you did not clearly comprehend and on which you sought guidance. I shall explain to you everything presently, after I shall premise one rule: the translator who proposes to render each word literally and adhere slavishly to the order of the words and sentences in the original, will meet with much difficulty and the result will be doubtful and corrupt. This is not the right method. The translator should first try to grasp the meaning of the subject, and then state the theme with perfect clarity in the other language. This, however, cannot be done without changing the order of words, putting many words for one word, and vice versa, so that the subject be perfectly intelligible in the language into which he translates.

This is the method Honein ben Ishak followed with the books of Galen, and his son Ishak with Aristotle's books, and for this reason their commentaries are clear. We too, therefore, ought to engage only in the study of these books and omit the others. The same applies to the exalted academy, in all the interpretations and copying in which they are involved for for their revered masters and the truth-seeking leaders of the communities. May the blessed Name of the Lord cause them to bring prestige to

other communities among the learned of Israel and may He help you and increase your reward. . . .

Now God knows that in order to write this to you I have escaped to a secluded spot, where people would not think to find me, sometimes leaning for support against the wall, sometimes lying down on account of my excessive weakness, for I have grown old and feeble.

But with respect to your wish to come here to me, I cannot but say how greatly your visit would delight me, for I truly long to commune with you, and would anticipate our meeting with even greater joy than you. Yet I must advise you not to expose yourself to the perils of the voyage, for beyond seeing me, and my doing all I could to honor you, you would not derive any advantage from your visit. Do not expect to be able to confer with me on any scientific subject for even one hour either by day or by night, for the following is my daily occupation: —

I reside at Misr (Fostat) and the Sultan resides at Kahira (Cairo); these two places are two Sabbaths days' journey [about one mile and a half] distant from each other. My duties to the Sultan are very heavy. I am obliged to visit him every day, early in the morning; and when he or any of his children, or any of the inmates of his harem, are indisposed, I dare not quit Cairo, but must stay during the greater part of the day in the palace. It also frequently happens that one or two of the royal officers fall sick, and I must attend to their healing. As a rule, I go to Cairo very early in the day, and even if nothing unusual happens, I do not return to Fostat until the afternoon. Then I am almost dying with hunger. I find the ante-chambers filled with people, both Jews and Gentiles, nobles and common people, judges and bailiffs, friends and foes — a mixed multitude, who await the time of my return.

I dismount from my animal, wash my hands, go forth to my patients, and entreat them to bear with me while I partake of some slight refreshment, the only meal I take in the twenty-four hours. Then I attend to my patients, write prescriptions and directions for their various ailments. Patients go in and out until nightfall, and sometimes even, I solemnly assure you, until two hours and more in the night. I converse with and prescribe for

them while lying down from sheer fatigue, and when night falls I am so exhausted that I can scarcely speak.

In consequence of this, no Israelite can have any private interview with me except on the Sabbath. On that day the whole congregation, or at least the majority of the members, come to me after the morning service, when I instruct them as to their proceedings during the whole week; we study together a little until noon, when they depart. Some of them return, and read with me after the afternoon service until evening prayers. In this manner I spend that day. I have here related to you only a part of what you would see if you were to visit me.

Now, when you have completed for our brethren the translation you have commenced, I beg that you will come to me, but not with the hope of deriving any advantage from your visit as regards your studies; for my time is, as I have shown you, excessively occupied.

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